

THE THREE WHEELS OF DHARMA

From the time of his enlightenment at Bodhgaya until his death in Kushinagar Buddha Shakyamuni gave extensive teachings - for about 45 years he turned what is called the *Wheel of Dharma*. There are 84,000 collections of discourses taught by the Buddha according to the diverse dispositions, inclinations and interests of his disciples.

Among the different ways in which those teachings are classified, one of the most common is the classification into the *Three Wheels of Dharma*. According to Lama Tsongkhapa's *Essence of Excellent Explanation of Interpretable and Definitive Meanings (Drang-nges legs-bshad snying-po)*, the convention of the Three Wheels is an attempt to categorize the content and philosophical views of the large array of Buddhist sutrayana teachings, and it derives from the *Sutra Unraveling the Thought (dGongs pa nges par 'grel ba'i mdo, Skt. Samdhinirmocana Sutra)*. In the seventh chapter of this sutra, the bodhisattva Paramartha Samudgata asks the Buddha what he had in mind when during the first wheel he said that phenomena exist truly and during the second wheel that they do not, for if taken literally, these two statements appear to be contradictory. Since the Buddha was aware that the disciples present at the time of Paramartha Samudgata's question were suitable vessels for the Chittamatra (Mind-Only) tenets, he replied by explaining that phenomena can be divided into those that exist truly and those that do not. With this explanation the Buddha presented the philosophical system of the Chittamatra, whose proponents assert that impermanent phenomena and emptiness exist truly, whereas permanent phenomena other than emptiness do not.

The categorization into three wheels derived from the seventh chapter of the *Sutra Unravelling the Thought* is therefore made from the point of view of the subject matter -- or more precisely -- it is made from the point of view of explaining selflessness. Hence the three wheels do not include all the discourses given by the Buddha.

The three wheels according to the *Sutra Unravelling the Thought* are:

First Wheel

The first wheel is from the point of view of the Hinayana (Theravada/Fundamental Vehicle), and it refers to the Buddha's first teaching, the *Sutra on the Four Noble Truths ('Phags pa'i bden pa bzhi'i mdo, Skt. Catvari Aryasatyani Sutra)* given in the Sarnath deer park near Varanasi to his first five disciples, shortly after his enlightenment.

Since they teach related subject matters, the following sutras pertain to the category of the first wheel (though they are not referred to as the first wheel):

1. The *Sutra of the Close Placement of Mindfulness on the Sacred Dharmas (Dam-pa'i chos dran pa nyer bzhas gi mdo, Skt. Saddharma Smṛtyupāśthana Sutra)*
2. *Hundreds of Karmic Deeds (Las brgya pa, Skt. Karmashataka Sutra)*
3. *Hundreds of Accounts of Realizations (rTogs brjod brgya pa, Skt. Avadanashataka Sutra)*
4. The *Scriptural Texts of the Rules of Discipline ('Dul ba'i lung shes che ba, Skt. Vinayagama)*.

Second Wheel

The second wheel constitutes Mahayana (Universal Vehicle) teachings and refers to the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, given by the Buddha on Vulture Peak Mountain in Rajghir. They explicitly teach the ultimate truth and implicitly the meditational paths that lead to full enlightenment.

Sutras that teach related subject matter and therefore pertain to the category of the second wheel are:

1. The *Descent into Lanka Sutra (Lang kar gshegs pa'i mdo, Skt. Lankavatara Sutra)*,
2. The *King of Concentration Sutra (Ting nge 'dzin rgyal po'i mdo, Skt. Samādhirāja Sutra)*,
3. The *Sutra of the Ten Bhūmis (mDo sde sa bcu pa, Skt. Dashabhūmika Sutra)*,
4. The *Sutra of the Essence of the Tathagata (De bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'i mdo, Skt. Tathagathagarbha Sutra)*,
5. The *Sutra Requested by the Arya Shṛīmālā ('phags pa dpal 'phreng gi mdo, Skt. Aryaśhrīmālā Paripṛcchā Sutra)*,
6. The *Sutra of the Ornament for the Illumination of Primordial Wisdom (Ye shes snang ba'i rgyan gyi mdo, Skt. Jñānaloka Ālambaka Sutra)*,
7. The *Sutra of the Great Nirvāṇa (Mya ngan las 'das pa chen po'i mdo, Skt. Mahāparinirvāṇa Sutra)*, and the *Sutra of the Question of Dharanishvararāja (gZungs kyi dbang phyug rgyal pos zhus pa, Skt. Dharanishvararajapariṛcchā)*

Third Wheel

The third wheel is also from the point of view of the Mahayana and refers to the above mentioned part of the seventh chapter of the *Sutra Unravelling the Thought*, called *Questions by Paramartha Samudgata* (*Don-dam yang-dag 'phags-kyis zhus-pa*, Skt. *Paramartha Samudgata Pariprccha*) in which Paramartha Samudgata asks the Buddha about the different explanations given in the first and second wheel, and the Buddha replies by expounding the philosophical system of the Chittamatra.

The remaining nine chapters of the *Sutra Unravelling the Thought* pertain to the category of the third wheel.

Please note that the *Sutra Unravelling the Thought* has ten chapters with questions put by nine Bodhisattvas and one Hearer (Subhuti). In the first chapter a Bodhisattva replies whereas in the remaining chapters the reply is given by the Buddha. The Sutra was taught in Vaishali.

Even though the *Sutra of the Essence of the Tathagata* (*De bzhin gshegs pa'i snying po'i mdo*, Skt. *Tathagathagarbha Sutra*) is described as pertaining to the category of the second wheel, it is also often explained to be a subsection of the third wheel.

Interestingly, in the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* (the second wheel) the Buddha presented mainly the objective Buddha Nature -- also called the objective clear light -- which refers to the ultimate truth of emptiness. On the other hand, in the *Sutra of the Essence of the Tathagata* (from the third turning of the wheel of Dharma) the Buddha additionally taught the subjective Buddha Nature (the clear light of wisdom). This sutra is therefore regarded as a bridge between the Sutric and the Tantric teachings, of which the latter were also given by the Buddha mainly around the time of his turning the third wheel.

This concludes a brief description of the three wheels.

Of the three wheels, the teachings of the second wheel, the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, are the principal genre of teachings relied upon for the study of Buddhist philosophy.

The *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* are also called "Sutras of the Sublime Mother".

Here, "Sublime Mother" refers to Prajna-Paramita, the female Buddha figure that represents wisdom, or to wisdom itself. Wisdom is called "Sublime Mother" because like a mother gives birth to her children, wisdom gives birth to all Arya beings (i.e. those who have directly realized the ultimate nature of emptiness).

THE ORNAMENT FOR CLEAR REALIZATIONS

Regarding the subject matter of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, they explicitly teach the ultimate nature of phenomena (i.e. the emptiness of true existence) and implicitly or in a hidden fashion, the meditational paths leading to enlightenment. Nagarjuna, in his *Six Compendia of Reasoning* (*Rigs tshogs drug*) expounded on the explicit meaning of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras* and Maitreya, in his *Ornament for Clear Realizations* (*mngon rtogs rgyan*, Skt. *Abhisamayalamkara*), expounded on their implicit meaning. The *Ornament for Clear Realizations*, which consists of eight chapters, is therefore a commentary on the implicit meaning of the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*.

THE TITLE OF THE ORNAMENT

The Tibetan translation of the *Ornament for Clear Realizations* ('the Ornament') starts by citing the *Ornament's* full name in Sanskrit, the language in which Maitreya originally taught the text:

In Sanskrit: Abhisamayalamkara-nama-prajnaparamita-upadesha-shastra-karika

This is followed by the citation of the full name in Tibetan:

In Tibetan: ཤེས་རབ་ཀྱི་ཕ་རོལ་དུ་ཕྱིན་པའི་མན་ངག་གི་བསྟན་བཅོས་མངོན་པར་རྟོགས་པའི་བྱམ་ཞེས་བྱ་བའི་ཆོག་ལེན་

བྱས་པ།

(Wylie: *Shes rab kyi pha rol du phyin pa'i man ngag gi bstan bcos mngon par rtogs pa'i rgyan zhes bya ba'i tshig le'ur byas pa*)

